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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the school choice behavior of Collegeville parents who lived within three optional attendance zones and who were sending their children to the Collegeville schools for the first time. Subjects were 48 mothers in such families. Interviews were intended to determine the following: (1) whether parents who were offered a choice deliberated about the options available to them or whether they chose a school on the basis of one or two narrow criteria; (2) what procedures the parents followed in selecting a school; and (3) what criteria the parents used in making their final selections. Findings show that over two-thirds of the parents used their choice opportunities to select the school they felt was most suited to their child. Active search behavior seemed to be elicited by two considerations: (1) schools available to the parents qualitatively differed; and (2) education levels of the parents were high. Parents at the lower ends of the socioeconomic range were less likely to have heard about their choice opportunity and to have researched and deliberated. Generally, parents were most concerned about the nature of the school and classroom environment to which their child would be exposed. (Author/JLL)

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THE SCHOOL CHOICE BEHAVIOR OF PARENTS AFFORDED PUBLIC SCHOOL OPTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF PARENTAL DECISION MAKING IN ONE SUBURBAN COMMUNITY

by

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Introduction

Prominant among those who urge the reform of public schooling are those who press for greater consumer sovereignty in family affiliation with schools.[1] These reformers argue that the American public is pluralistic in its preferences for schooling. Some families, they suggest, prefer structured education. Other families prefer more informal classrooms. Some families view schooling devoid of religious or moral training as incomplete. Other families want schools to remain as neutral as possible in their pronouncements on moral behavior. Following current educational practices, at present families are assigned to public schools on the basis of where they live. Any educational preferences that parents might have are not considered. Typically the programs most parents encounter in public schools are conventional in nature and ideologically bland. Public schools are subject to legislative and judicial decisions which mandate some offerings (e.g., the teaching of U.S. history) and preclude others (e.g., religious instruction). Public schools must present programs that are acceptable to the majority of the families which reside within the school attendance zones. Public school parents generally have no choice about which school they will use.

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[1] See, for example, Milton Friedman, Capitalism and Freedom (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), chapter 6; and Mario Fantini, "Options for Students, Parents and Teachers: Public School of Choice", Phi Delta Kappan, 52 (May, 1971), 541-543.

The schools to which they will be assigned only in unusual instances depart in major ways from conventional educational practice. Where schools do develop distinctive identities (e.g., because of the educational philosophy of an administrator or staff), parents outside the district usually have no access to the school. As a result, these critics suggest, current assignment practices, inhibit opportunities for schools to respond to the pluralistic educational preferences of American families and for parents to exercise schooling preferences.

To remediate this weakness in conventional educational practice, new patterns of family-school affiliation have been proposed, each of which is intended to increase parental opportunities for school choice. Two solutions—are most frequently advanced. Voucher advocates propose that parents be given an educational voucher which they could redeem at whatever school they felt could best provide schooling for their children.[2] The public school of choice advocates that the public schools within a district develop distinctive identities and that families within the district be allowed to select which school they will use.

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[2]See, for example, Christopher Jencks, "Giving Parents Money for Schooling: Educational Vouchers", Phi Delta Kappan, 52 (September, 1970), 49-52.

Fantini summaries the intent of such multi-option system of school choice:

> A ground rule intrinsic to the idea of free and open society and, therefore, to the notion of Public Schools of Choice, is that no educational plan or design can be imposed. Within a system of choice, the alternative schools and educational situations are presented to the consumer and, as in a supermarket or cafeteria, the individual 'shops around', chooses, selects, tests and finally settles on a school or learning environment that appeals to him.[3] (p. 42)

The opportunities for parent to exercise school choices in the public domain in this country are few. Parents who can afford generally expensive independent schools or who are members of religious groups which maintain a moderately priced system of schools (e.g., members of the Roman Catholic Church of the Missouri or Wisconsin Lutheran Synods) can choose between public and private schooling or among the private schools available to them. A few parents are able to send their children across school district lines by paying tuitions to the receiving school districts. Several school systems now allow parents to use any district school they wish. Within these open enrollment or permissive transfer plans some sort of district approval usually is needed, however, before a move is made. Parental movement typically is reported to be minimal. A few districts have gone further and have attempted to create an array of qualitatively different schools within the district to permit parental choices. One well-publicized example, the school district of Alum Rock, California, received federal support to initiate a "quasi-voucher" program of schooling. But these cited instances of parental choice are limited.

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[3] Fantini, Mario, Public Schools of Choice, (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1973), p. 42.

A study of parental choice behavior in the Collegeville school system would appear to usefully augment studies of family choice behavior in other districts. Parents in three attendance areas in Collegeville, a suburban midwestern school district educating nearly 7000 students, choose between two schools the one to which they will send their elementary school age children. In these three areas two elementary school attendance zones overlap. The parents living in these areas may use either school. No board permission is required. School choice in these areas is an accepted practice and by board policy the parents' choice must be accepted. The three optional attendance areas have been in existence for several years. The reasons why they were initially created remain obscure. (Some central office administrators speculate they were created to relieve overcrowding.) The elementary schools serving the zones are not unlike the other elementary schools in the district. No special transportation is provided the parents in these areas. No special services are furnished within the schools. The schools are not intended to be experimental. Over time however the schools have developed distinctive identities. In one zone, for example, parents have the choice between generally structured elementary schooling and a school which features some open education and multi-age grouping. In another zone parents have an option between an all white school and a racially mixed one. The parents who live within these three zones thus make school choices which in many ways are similar to those which would be provided parents participating in a multi-option system of schooling. The Collegeville parents within these optional attendance areas routinely make a choice between two somewhat dissimilar,

though not experimental public schools. Their decision is part of accepted ongoing practice. They are not involved in any experimental program of school choice. A study of their choice behavior would seem useful in providing insight into the type of choice behavior which might be anticipated from parents participating in a program of multi-option education. This paper reports on several outcomes of such an investigation.

The purpose of the study discussed in this paper was to examine the school choice behavior of the Collegeville parents who lived within three optional attendance zones and who were sending their children to the Collegeville schools for the first time (parents new to the community and long time residents whose oldest child was entering the Collegeville schools for the first time). Interviews with the parents addressed three related questions. The first intent of the investigation was to learn whether the parents who were offered a choice deliberated about the options available to them or whether they choose a school on the basis of one or two narrow choice criterion. The public school of choice advocates anticipate that families offered choices will select schools which match their preferences for the content and structure of schooling. The research questioned whether the parents sought such a match or whether they selected a school for their child on the basis of more limited criterion. Two such criterion in particular were considered. Because elementary schools in this country typically are neighborhood schools it was explored whether parents choose their school just because it was the nearest school. Because the schools available to the parents varied in their racial makeups, an effort was made to determine if the

parents chose schools after attending only to the racial composition of the student populations enrolled there.

A second intent of the interviews was to learn what procedures the parents followed in selecting a school. During this phase of the investigation, for example, an effort was made to learn to what extent parents visited the schools available to them, to what extent they relied on the advice of friends, and to what extent they used information provided by the school district. The third intent of the interviews, and one which was related closely to the first, was to learn what criteria the parents used in making their final selections. For those parents who deliberated between two schools the question was asked, "On what basis did they make their final decision?"

The data gathered to address these questions was collected during interviews with the mothers living in three optional attendance zones in Collegeville who were sending their children to the Collegeville schools for the first time. The Collegeville community, the elementary schools serving the three optional attendance zones and the characteristics of the families living within these zones are discussed in the next sections.

Methodology

Setting

The Collegeville community is bordered on one side by a Midwestern city, on another by a private university, on another by wealthy white suburbs, and on still another by middle and working-class black suburbs. Until 1963, fewer than 100 of the then over 50,000 Collegeville residents were black. By 1970, approximately 20% of the population was black.

By 1976, the percentage of blacks in the community had grown to 30%. Over 60 percent of the students in the schools are black. The residential racial composition of the community at present is relatively stable. The community has a tradition of liberalism, in part because many persons within the community work at the nearby university. The school system is regarded as effective and innovative. Over half the parents interviewed reported that one reason why they moved into Collegeville was the good reputation of the schools. The system over the years has attracted a large number of federal and foundation grants.

At present the city numbers somewhat over 45,000 residents. The school district provides education for 7,000 students. Neighborhoods within the city vary in their racial and socioeconomic compostion. These differences are reflected in the racial and socioeconomic composition of the three optional attendance zones.

The families living in Zone I are for the most part white and well-educated. Much of the most expensive housing in the community is located within Zone I. Some apartment buildings, occupied in large number by graduate students, line two edges of the district.

Parents in Zone I choose between Rock Hill and Avery schools. Both are K-5 elementary schools. They differ, however, in several ways. Rock Hill is nearly all white. Avery is approximately half white and half black. The children attending Rock Hill are almost consistently from middle and upper middle class backgrounds. The economic backgrounds of children in Avery school vary from well-off to poor. Most classrooms in Rock Hill are self-contained. In Avery a variety of classroom

arrangements, including open and multi-age classrooms, is offered.

The homes in Zone II are somewhat more moderately priced. Zone II parents are, however, largely middle-class. Black families are uncommon in Zone I. Many live within Zone II. Zone II parents choose between Avery, which provides a variety of classroom organizations for a heterogeneous student population, and Clear Ridge, where blacks somewhat outnumber whites. This school is, for the most part, conventionally structured. Thus like Zone I parents, Zone II parents have a choice between a fairly traditional school and a generally innovative school. Their options in terms of racial composition, however, are less dramatic than those afforded Zone I parents. Zone I parents choose between a nearly all-white school and one which is half-white and half-black. Zone II parents have available to them two schools in which children from either race heavily predominate.

Lower-middle and working-class blacks predominate in Zone III, the smallest of the three optional attendance districts. Parents in Zone III choose between Clear Ridge, a school in which blacks only somewhat outnumber whites and in which largely conventional schooling is offered, and Mark Twain, a school which is over 90 percent black and in which an individualized, non-graded program of instruction is provided.

The choices provided the parents living in the three optional attendance zones in Collegeville are arrayed in Figure I.

Figure I

Summary Characteristics of Families and Schools in Collageville Optional Attendance Zones

Zone	School Choice	
Zone I White, middle and upper middle class families	Rock Hill 92% white, 8% black Conventional, graded classroom structure	Avery 52% white, 48% black Variety of classroom options, including open and multi-age classrooms
Zone II Parents from racially integrated neighborhood middle and upper-middle SES backgrounds	Clear Ridge 59% black, 41% white Conventional, graded classroom structure	Avery 52% white, 48% black Variety of classroom options, including open and multi-age classrooms
Zone III Largely black, lower-middle/upper-lower and working class families	Clear Ridge 59% black, 41% white Conventional, graded classroom structure	Mark Twain 93% black, 7% white Nongraded, individualized program

Sample

Lists of parents living within the optional attendance zones who were using the schools for the first time (parents who were not new Collegeville residents but whose oldest child was entering the school for the first time and parents of primary age children who were new to the district) were secured from the district office. The mothers in the fifty families identified by the school officials were contacted for interviews. All but two of the mothers agreed to be interviewed. The distribution of the families across the three districts is reported in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Distribution of Collegeville Parents Interviewed, Reported by Zone and School Used

Zone and School	Number of Families
Zone I	
Rock Hill	4
Avery	15
Total	19
Zone II	
Avery	7
Clear Ridge	14
Total	21
Zone III	
Clear Ridge	7
Mark Twain	1
Total	8
Total	48

The parents interviewed in Zone I, with the exception of one set of parents in which the husband was white and the wife black, were all white (See Table 2). In Zone II the balance of white and black families was nearly equal. In Zone III all but one of the parents were black.

TABLE 2

Racial Backgrounds of Parents Interviewed, Reported by Zone

Zone	% Families White	% Families Black
1	100% (N=18)*	
2	52.4% (N=11)	47.6% (N=10)
3	12.5% (N=1)	87.5% (N=7)

* Does not include one inter-racial family

The socioeconomic backgrounds of the families (computed using Hollingshead's Two Factor Index of Social Position) is arrayed in Table 3.[4] Zone I parents were predominately found in the upper-middle and upper class range. Zone II parents clustered less at the upper end of the scale. Zone III parents were almost exclusively lower middle class.

[4]See A.B. Hollingshead and F.C. Redlich, Social Class and Mental Illness (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1958), 398-407.

TABLE 3

Socioeconomic Background of Parents Interviewed, Reported by Zones

Zone	Percent Upper Class (I)	Percent Upper-middle (II)	Percent Middle (III)	Percent Lower-middle/ Upper lower(IV)
1	53.0% (N=10)	21.0% (N=4)	21.0% (N=4)	5.3% (N=1)
2	38.1% (N=8)	23.8% (N=5)	19.0% (N=4)	19.0% (N=4)
3			12.5% (N=1)	87.5% (N=7)

The School District of Collegeville makes no formal effort to inform parents who move into the optional attendance zones that they have a school option. Maps illustrating the optional attendance zones are printed in some of the district literature and distributed upon request. No effort is made, however, to systematically distribute this literature to any parents. Most parents living in the optional attendance zones hear about the school choice from their neighbors and friends. Not all parents become aware, however, that they have a choice. The interviews conducted with the mothers began, therefore, with questions which probed whether they knew they had had a choice of schools. Of the forty-eight mothers interviewed, twelve mothers, or 25 percent of those interviewed, revealed they were unaware of the option plan. Breaking down this information by zone revealed that all of the Zone I parents were aware that they had a choice, while

thirty-eight percent of the Zone II parents were unaware of their choice opportunity, and half of the Zone III parents were similarly uninformed about their option. The nonknowers were disproportionately black. Eighty-three percent of the nonknowers were black. Only 35 percent of all the parents interviewed were black. The nonknowers also tended to be less well educated than those who knew about their choice (see Table 4). Half of the nonknowers, for example, concluded their education with a high school diploma. Altogether, only five percent of those who knew they had a choice ended their education with high school.

TABLE 4

Educational Backgrounds of Fathers in Families Aware and Unaware of School Choice Opportunities

Education Level of Father	Families Aware of Choice	Families Unaware of Choice
High School	5.5% (N=2)	50.0% (N=6)
Some College or College	25.0% (N=9)	25.0% (N=3)
Some Post Graduate	27.8% (N=10)	16.7% (N=2)
Professional Degree or Ph.D.	41.7% (N=15)	8.3% (N=1)

Deleting the nonknowers from the sample left 36 families. The 36 families, of course, were not a typical cluster of American families. None of the poor were among their numbers. Education levels in these

families of knowers were very high. In Zone I the husbands averaged nearly six years of schooling beyond high school. The wives averaged 3.53 years past high school graduation. Education levels in Zone II were similarly high (5.45 and 3.84 respectively). Only the four families aware of choice in Zone III reported educational histories which ended with high school graduation. The parents were also unusual in that they lived in an integrated community. They moved into Collegeville or chose to stay there knowing that their neighbors might well be from a different racial background than their own and that when their children attended the Collegeville schools, several of their classmates almost assuredly would be.

Interview Procedures

Focused interviews were conducted with the mothers in the 48 optional-zone families using these designated Collegeville schools for the first time. The interviews began with questions which probed whether the families were aware that they had a choice. If the mothers reported they were aware, the interviewer then asked a series of questions about how the parents became aware of their choice, why they picked one school over another, to what extent they had had associations with any school personnel or community leaders (who might have influenced their decisions), what information sources they used in deliberating about their choices, and what part concerns about school distances played in their decisions.

Four interviewers gathered the data (two white women, one black female and one white male). Analysis of the parents' responses indicated

no systematic differences in the responses provided the white and black interviewers.

The interviews were refined after pilot testing with four families. After interviews with both the husbands and wives in a small number of families from the final population it was found that the mothers appeared to gather most of the information relating to the school choices and to provide descriptions of the choice making processes which generally were more complete, if not at least parallel, to those provided by their husbands. The decision was made, therefore, to interview the mother in the family and meet with her husband only when the mother indicated the father was largely responsible for the decision. This determination was made in one case only. Two other fathers were interviewed, however, not because they had made the decision, but because their families were new to this country (the fathers were visiting academics) and the husbands spoke more fluent English than their wives. The interviews were conducted in February, 1976. The interviews typically lasted between thirty minutes and an hour. (A copy of the interview guide is included at the end of this paper.)

Findings

A major intent of the interviews was to learn if the Collegeville parents researched and pondered their options, or if they made a decision after little deliberation by invoking only one or two limited choice criterion (distance was the one thought to be the most probable). Those who press for consumer sovereignty in school affiliation hopefully

anticipate that parents afforded choices will research their alternatives and select the school whose programs are most congruent with their preferences for schooling. An effort was made, therefore, to learn if the Collegeville parents who were afforded options deliberated over and researched their alternatives or whether they took their choice casually and made a decision with little thought.

The interviews revealed that the bulk of the parents interviewed had preferences for how they thought schools should be run, that they examined the schools available to them to learn which school most satisfied their preferences, that they detected differences in the schools available to them and that they made their choice based on reasons more elaborate than "distance to the school" or "racial makeup of the school", as a group they were generally active searchers.

Much of the parents' initial search behavior involved talking with friends or neighbors who had children in the schools and who could talk "knowledgeably" about a school's programs. A mother who teaches English at the college level, for example, talked about how she relied upon trusted friends to provide information on the schools and about the available teachers.

> I did not visit the schools because I knew about Mrs. Smith and I knew I wanted Avery. That was the first decision we made. And then within Avery we heard about Mrs. Smith from several people who had had children in her class and who had been mothers helpers and so had been there day in and out and had watched her teach. They were people that I trusted. I did not visit the school. I would have had I not had access to that information. If it had just been up to me, I would have gone over there to look at all of them. But I found that you can tell alot more by repeated experience with people you know where their judgement is. There repeated experience with a person is where you learn what they are like, much more than just dropping in for a day.

> (Why did you rule out Rock Hill?) I wanted to go to a school where there was a high degree of racial integration, which is not true of Rock Hill and we wanted a public school where there was a variety of economic backgrounds and where he would be prepared to go on through public school... (Case 8, Zone I)

The parents typically sought out parents whose values were similar to their own.

> The neighbors on one side go to Rock Hill and the neighbors on the other side go to Avery, and I'm friendlier with the neighbor on this side. My questions to her were somewhat on academic quality, the quality she thought her children were getting. Her other children had gone to parochial schools and she was highly enthusiastic about what her child going to Avery was getting. That helped to satisfy me. (Case 15, Zone I)

Nearly 70 percent of the parents also visited at least one of the schools. Some of the parents visited both schools before making up their minds.

> We called the school office and they sent us all sorts of information and then when we moved in I talked with our neighbors. We went to one school in the morning and another school in the afternoon. We wanted to look around and talk to people. And then we spent a few days talking with neighbors and to the people who had lived in this house before us. And then we weighed everything and made our decision. (What did you like about Avery?) We had heard that Collegeville was a progressive school system and we wanted to see what sorts of programs they had. Avery looked like a fun place to be. The kids would learn over there. It was very casual. The principal said, "Go wherever you want to go. Open any doors that are open." They were very warm. That made us feel comfortable. (Did you rule out Rock Hill because of the type of school it was or did you like both but liked Avery better?) Yes, I'm sure Rock Hill is a good school. (Case 10, Zone I)

In several cases the parents more or less had their minds made up before they went to the school, but still entered the school to make sure that their decision was a sound one. The Collegeville school system permits parents to select teachers. Often teacher selection was a related objective of the parent's visits.

> From our friends who lived in this neighborhood, we were told that Avery had a great variety of programs that children could be involved in in school, a great variety of classroom structures. We were told that Rock Hill was a pretty traditional school in terms of education. We were told that Avery had traditional classrooms, but it also had other options. It sounded exciting. We weren't aware of what educational goals we really had for our child because he was still in kindergarten, it was just a year ago. So I went over to Avery before we moved in and viewed the four first grade rooms because it was at that time that we were allowed to pick which teacher we wanted our child to be in for the next year. And the principal more or less told me what the strengths of each of the rooms were from traditional to open classroom. The variety of children on the playground that we viewed—our little boy went with us to the playground and saw the children—we enjoyed seeing the variety.... We were not told any negatives about Rock Hill as such. We were told it was a traditional school and we were told there was not the variety of cultural backgrounds or racial backgrounds there. And for some people that would have been a negative or positive side. (Case 13, Zone I)

A few of the parents made their school decision by selecting which teacher they thought would be best for their child and then enrolling their child in the school in which that teacher taught.

> The first thing I looked at was the teachers. I looked at both kindergartens at Avery and the one kindergarten at Rock Hill. I primarily chose which teacher I thought would be best. ...I liked the open classroom setting at Avery. The whole atmosphere seemed a little warmer to me. They were more innovative and it seemed more exciting a place for children. (What were you looking for?) Well, I didn't look very much at the school itself. I looked at the classrooms and watched the teachers. I watched her way of dealing with children, how she organized her day, what sorts of things she included in each part of the afternoon, what kinds of materials she used, her personality. Those were the main things I looked at. (Why did you rule out Rock Hill?) I ruled out Rock Hill on the basis that all the activities were carried out in a group, at the time I went down there a large portion of the activities were grouped. It was a little stiff and very traditional, like what I had encountered in school at that age. Not very creative in the ways that classrooms seemed to be at Avery. (Case 9, Zone I)

The major type of search activities in which parents could engage and the number of parents who engaged in the activities is reported in Table 5. As these data indicate, the parents most frequently

talked with friends who were knowledgeable about the schools and visited at least one of the schools available to them. Smaller, but not inconsequential numbers of parents also talked with the school principal, sent for more information, or studied classroom materials and the schools instructional program. Many of the parents engaged in a number of these activities.

TABLE 5

Percentage of Collegeville Parents Engaging in Several Search Activities

Type of Search Activity	Percentage of Parents Engaging in Activity
Talked with neighbors or friends who have prior experience with schools.	72% (N=26)
Visited one or both of the available schools.	69% (N=25)
Visited classrooms within schools.	44% (N=16)
Examine classroom materials and school curricula.	28% (N=10)
Talked with school principal.	22% (N=8)

To supplement this phase of the investigation, a study was made of the choice behavior of each set of parents in order to categorize them as "searchers" and "nonsearchers". Searchers were defined as parents who investigated one or more schools, usually by visiting one

or both schools and talking with friends, who deliberated over the options available to them, and engaged in several search strategies. The process of decision for these parents typically was an extended one (a week's worth of investigation and deliberation at a minimum). The parents typically deliberated about choice at length. Nonsearchers were defined as those parents who gave little thought to the school choice, most frequently selecting the school used by most of the children in the neighborhood or the school that was closest. These parents typically gave very little time and thought to the decision. Using these broad definitions, it was found that over 70 percent of the parents could be categorized as moderate to active searchers. Only a little over 30 percent of the parents engaged in minimal search activity. Given an option, two thirds of the Collegeville parents aware of their choice made a conscious selection among the schools available to them.

Just as there is evidence that those who were unaware that they had a school choice tended to be drawn from the lower end of the socio-economic distribution of the families interviewed, there is some evidence that active search behavior was more common among those families that were higher than those who were lower in socioeconomic background. When the parents were partitioned into social classes using Hollingshead's Two Factor Index and the percentages of parents within each class who visited the schools was calculated, it became evident that those at the lower end of the SES range among the parents studied were less likely to have engaged in a major search behavior—visiting the schools (see Table 6). Those parents whose schooling ended with high school may have felt less familiar with schools and less

comfortable approaching a school for a visit than those who had completed post-high school education. They also may not have been aware that they could freely visit a school. Whatever the reason, however, this analysis suggested the extent of search behavior was not consistent across all the range of SES backgrounds of the parents studied.

TABLE 6

Percentages of Parents from Different Social Classes Visiting Schools

Class	Number in Class	Number Visiting	Percent
Upper Class (I)	16	13	81%
Upper middle (II)	7	6	86%
Middle (III)	8	4	50%
Lower middle/ Upper Lower (IV)	5	2	40%

For the parents who took advantage of their options to pick a school the processes of selection in which they engaged were generally similar. The criteria on which they made their final decisions often differed. When preparing to make the choice the parents seemed typically to draw upon the past knowledge of others, supplementing this knowledge with conversations with friends, talking with teachers and school visits. During their school visits they attended most

carefully to how the teachers in the primary units related to the children. In some cases the parents began the selection process with a defined set of choice criteria. At other times the choice criteria seemed to develop during exposure to the schools. During the final decision stage, when the parents determined which school met most of their criteria for their child, the husbands were the most active. Some illustrations of parents engaged in the process again would seem useful.

A mother who has a Ph.D. degree who teaches at a private Catholic girls high school, describes her search in some detail. She began the process desiring a school which was willing to experiment with new ideas. Her visit to the school occurred only after talking to friends (though even at this point she did not regard her decision as irreversible).

> We just kept our ears open. We didn't hear anyone say anything about Clear Ridge. Every was talking Avery. We didn't just hear good things, we also heard bad things. In any case we kept hearing things. (What did people say about the schools?) At Avery they said there are lots of rowdies and there are lots of fights in the johns. And then they said that all the new ideas in education are tried out at Avery. The school is very much alive. They are aware of what is going on. They don't mind trying things out and then dropping it if they don't like it. From all that I got the ideas the school was very much alive. (What did you want to know about the school?) What I wanted to avoid was going along with old ways just because they were used to them. Not that I am against going along with old ways but not for the reason that you are used to them. That was what I was afraid of, that may be a prejudice I had against Clear Ridge. No one discussed it so I took from that that they were conservative and going on in the way they had been going on for some time. (Did anything else concern you?) No, I think the main thing is the activity. Because that was a sign for me of seriousness and more or less of independency of thought on the side of the principal and teachers. You know people are now afraid to try out new ways. People have to decide to think for themselves. (Did you visit the schools?) Only Avery. I thought I had made up my mind by then. I walked through the school to get a feel for the atmosphere and then visited the kindergartens. (What were you looking for?) The

> atmosphere had to strike me as pleasant. In other words, had I on that first walk through the school seen many children frowning, for instance, or sulking, or running away from teacher, I would have given it a closer look. (Case 24, Zone II)

Another parent, a Ph.D. candidate from South America, opts for the less flexible alternative for his daughter. His priorities differ. His reliance on the advice and information provided by friends is much the same.

> My main concern was that my child, Gloria, who was in third grade in Chile, would continue learning. We wanted her to learn English and to meet other girls like herself. Someone told us that in a school like Avery the discipline is not very good. Avery was described as very modern. We felt that Gloria did not need so much freedom. I was a primary school teacher and I like a flexible system, but not too much. (Did you visit the schools?) Not really. I knew a little bit about Avery, but I didn't know Rock Hill. I had confidence that here in the United States the school conditions are very similar. Some of my friends told me that Rock Hill was a good school. My criteria for deciding was the experience of my friends. Here we have friends from Chile and from other Latin American countries and they can tell me better than anybody. (What did they tell you?) They told me that Rock Hill was not so free as Avery. I like flexibility, but I have some ideas about discipline. (Case 4, Zone I)

Another parent reports weighing both her public school option and the possibility of sending her child to two nearby private schools. Her choice was determined in large part by her assessment of the teachers she observed. She goes on to describe the full array of factors she considered.

> We considered the private school where she had been as a four year old, and Thorton, another private school, and I looked at Avery very carefully. I observed the kindergarten there very carefully for two days and I chose Mrs. Smith's kindergarten. I chose the school for that particular teacher and for that particular situation. (Did you consider any other Collegeville school?) Yes, I visited Rock Hill. (So you knew you had a choice?) Yes, that was one of the reasons why we moved into this subdivision. One has a little bit of leeway here.
>
> (What were you looking for when you visited the schools?) I was looking for a good teacher and a rich educational environment.

> (Could you describe a good teacher?) I think the confidence in the person matters more than the actual techniques used. In other words, I'm not dead set for an open classroom. Mrs. Smith uses kind of a regulated open classroom. I think the method matters less than the confidence used in applying it. I think that Mrs. Smith is an extremely competent teacher who handled her particular system very well. They have a more traditional framework at Rock Hill. I thought the teacher there was less imaginative. At Rock Hill the educational level of the children from the home environment was obviously higher, but I thought this was outweighed as a positive factor by the sheer competency of the Avery environment. (What do you mean by rich educational environment?) Classes that look interesting, lots of interesting stuff. Things that you can touch and get involved with. Lots of visual things. Equipment up to a point. It doesn't have to be expensive. Evidence of field trips and interesting things happening. (Case 17, Zone I)

An attempt was made during one phase of the interviews to make a systematic assessment of what factors the parents thought most important in making their choices. A list of 15 reasons why a person might choose a school was provided the mothers, who were asked to check the factors most important to them. The items were developed after a survey of the literature on parent selectivity in the nonpublic school sector and a review of the few studies of parent options in the public school sector. The list was expanded and the wording refined during the pilot interviews. A question of this sort has obvious limitations. Items may mean different things to different people. Parents may check items which might not have influenced them at the point of decision but have become reasons why they endorse the school (or perhaps rationalizations for why they choose it) as a result of exposure to the schools. Even with these limitations, however, the parents responses revealed some interesting patterns.

Reported in Table 7 are the percentages of parents who ranked each item as one of the five most important factors in their decision while

many more checked the item as most important, 3 items were ranked by at least forty-six percent of the parents. All three items were related to the quality of school life or school environment to which a child would be exposed. The parents most frequently checked the item "the general atmosphere of the school was the sort we wanted for our child".(70%) Forty-five percent of the parents indicated they selected a school in part because of the "principal's philosophy of education and attitude was one we felt comfortable with". As was indicated earlier, for many parents the choice of a school and the choice of a teacher were intertwined. Slightly over forty-five percent of the parents thus checked the response, "We were very interested in our child's teacher. We investigated her personal teaching style and classroom skills." This pattern of responses suggests that a large percentage of the parents appeared most attentive to the general school climate and classroom environments their child would encounter.

The list of responses is as interesting for what was not checked as it is for what was. Not ranking high on the list were the items on distance ("We were concerned about the distance to the school...."), on a desire to make a placement "where the children's backgrounds are similar to our own", and on a concern for the overall achievement level of the school ("We wanted to know what the overall achievement levels of the pupils were.")

TABLE 7

Number of Parents Interviewed Ranking Reasons for Choice as Very Important (top 5 criteria)

	Item	Number Ranking Item	Percent
a.	The general atmosphere of the school was the sort we wanted for our child.	23	70
b.	The principal's philosophy of education and attitude toward children was one we felt comfortable with.	15	45
c.	We were very interested in our child's teacher. We investigated her personal teaching style and classroom skills.	15	45
d.	We wanted a school where the children would be exposed to children of different ethnic and racial backgrounds.	12	36
e.	We responded to the overall curriculum and academic programs of the school.	12	36
f.	We were interested in a school that was racially integrated.	9	27
g.	We wanted to be certain we would have accessibility to both the principal and teachers.	10	30
h.	We wanted a school where the children would be exposed to children of different socio-economic backgrounds.	8	24
i.	We wanted to be certain the school had a good library or learning resource center.	8	24
j.	We were concerned that the walk to the school we chose was the safest route for our child; that is, there were crossing guards or a safe walking path.	7	21
k.	We were concerned about the distance to school. We wanted the school that was the closest walk for our children.	7	21

TABLE 7 (continued)

Item	Number Ranking Item	Percent
l. We wanted a school where the children's background is similar to our own.	4	12
m. We wanted to know where the overall achievement level of the pupils was.	3	9
n. We wanted a school where transportation could be provided either by a parent on the way to work or by the school system.	0	0
o. We were most concerned about the physical facilities.	0	0

Only seven parents ranked in the top five the item on distance when completing this phase of the survey. Six parents mentioned concern about distance when describing in their open ended accounts why they picked one school over another. The parents were asked at one point how far they thought a child as old as theirs should be able to walk to school. The schools serving the optional attendance zones generally were within the walking distances the parents reported to be acceptable. The parents thus were not confronted with a choice between two schools, one of which was very near, the other far. The mothers who expressed concerns over any differences in distance which were present worked and were unsure of what after-school arrangements they could make for their child. They were also concerned about safety to and from school.

A mother new to Collegeville who works during the day as a secretary talks about placing her nine year-old daughter in Avery:

> I wanted to be sure Alice would get a good education and I also wanted a classroom where there were open grades, because Alice had been in a school that had been sectioned off into pods, each classroom opened into another classroom, and she loved that school. I wanted her to get something similar. (To whom did you go for information on the schools?) I spoke at length to the neighbors on the first floor. They have two children in the school already. They recommended it very highly. I asked them about the schools, the distances, the curriculum, the type of children in the school... (You were concerned about distance?) Well, distance was important because of bad days when the weather would be bad. If she was at school and a rainstorm came up she would have to come home in the rain and I didn't want it to be too far. (Case 11, Zone I)

Another mother, also a secretary and also new to the community, talks about selecting Clear Ridge because it was close:

> We live in a district where they could attend either Clear Ridge or Avery, but we decided on Clear Ridge because it was so much closer. (Did you consider Avery at all?) For about five mimutes, until we found out where it was. ...We knew that the children would be walking to school and so we drove to Clear Ridge and drove to Avery and saw that Clear Ridge was closer. ...If I had to do it over now, knowing that there are baby-sitters and knowing the community a little more, I think I might at least have gone to the other school. Mostly because of my second grader. He seems unhappy. He seems to need more free time. (Do you think he would get that at Avery?) That is what I don't know. If I had the decision to make over again I would talk with them. (Case 32, Zone II)

For these working parents distance was a concern. For the remainder of the parents however, distance did not appear to be a major factor in their choice making.

The parents reported greater interest in diversity within the schools than they did in student homogeneity. They checked the items "We wanted a school where our child would be exposed to children from different ethnic and racial backgrounds" and "We wanted a school where the children would be exposed to children from different socioeconomic backgrounds" much more frequently than they checked the item "We wanted a school where the children's background is similar to our own". One purpose of the research was to learn if the parents in Collegeville

selected schools on the basis of race; that is, whether they choose one school over another because in the school they chose there was a high percentage of children from their own racial background. Study of the parents' choices reveals that well over half of the parents, blacks and white alike, chose the alternative school in which the "less favorable" racial makeup was present. In two of the zones parents confronted major differences in the racial compositions of the schools available to them. In Zone I white parents had a choice between a nearly all-white school (Rock Hill) and one in which whites slightly outmumbered blacks (Avery). In Zone III, black parents had a choice between a nearly all-black school and one in which forty percent of the students were white. In both cases the majority of the parents chose the more integrated school.

In Table 8 the parents' school choices are arrayed in such a way that it is possible to note whether the families selected the school option available to them in which the racial balance was more or less favorable to their own race. The data in Table 8 is then aggregated in Table 9.

TABLE 8

School Choices of Collegeville Parents, Reported by Race of Parents

Zone and Subgroup	Rock Hill 92%W, 8%B	Avery 52%W, 48%B	Clear Ridge 41%W, 59%B	Mark Twain 7%W, 93%B
Zone I				
White Families (18)	22% (N=4)	78% (N=14)		
Black Families (0)				
Zone II				
White Families (9)		56% (N=5)	44% (N=4)	
Black Families (4)		75% (N=3)	25% (N=1)	
Zone III				
White Families (1)			100% (N=1)	
Black Families (3)			100% (N=3)	

TABLE 9

Number of Collegeville Parents Choosing Alternative Schools "More" or "Less" Racially Favorable

Population Subgroup	Percent Choosing More Favorable School Racially	Percent Choosing Less Favorable School Racially
White Parents	33% (N=9)	67% (N=19)
Black Parents	13% (N=1)	88% (N=7)

A quick glance at Table 8 reveals that two thirds of the white parents chose schools in which the percentage of white children in the school was less than the percentage of white children enrolled in their alternative school. Nearly nine of ten blacks selected the more integrated setting. As was noted earlier, the Collegeville parents were in many ways unrepresentative of American public school users. They lived, for example, in a desegregated community and sent their children to schools were there has been more than token desegregation. The behavior of the atypical parents indicates that at least in this population a desire to avoid contact with children from different racial backgrounds was not a primary motivation in school selection. On the contrary, many parents reported preferences for a heterogeneous student population.

Singularly absent from the parents open-ended accounts was any mention of attention to the teachers at the upper grade levels. Those parents who researched the school attended closely to the reputation and behaviors of the kindergarten teachers and occasionally sought information on the attitudes and behaviors of the principal. They appeared comparatively uninterested in (or at least did not talk about) the behaviors and reputations of the upper grade teachers. When the parents visited the schools they asked to see the kindergartens. They often tried to develop a "sense" of the school by walking through the halls. They did not report inquiring about, or asking to see the teachers whom their children would have during their later school years. Some parents reported rejecting Rock Hill because of their discomfort with the single kindergarten teacher teaching there. They did not appear

to consider closely whether the upper grades at Rock Hill might be more appropriate for their child than those at Avery. Perhaps the parents felt kindergarten teachers are accurate bellweathers of a school's total educational experience. Perhaps they felt if they encountered an ineffective teacher later on they could exercise their option of selecting whichever teacher their child should have. Whatever their reasons, their judgments of school quality appeared in large measure dependent on the parents' assessments of the kindergarten offerings and the school environment as a whole.

Similarly absent from the parents accounts were any inquiries about one of the traditional measures of school quality—achievement test results. Many parents expressed concerns about the quality of the academic program. Only four parents, however, check the item "We wanted to know where the overall achievement level of the pupils was" when responding to the 15 item list of possible reasons for school selection. No parent reported asking about the schools' achievement test results. Perhaps the parents felt if they could identify a suitable school climate, academic results would be assured. Perhaps they felt as well-educated parents they were capable of providing a home setting which would facilitate school success. Whatever their reasoning, however, their universal unconcern with one conventional measure of academic success—achievement test scores—was unexpected.

Conclusion

The population of parents studied in this research was not fully representatives of American school users. The parents interviewed were umusually well-educated. Their attitudes on the desirability of racial and socioeconomic diversity in schools would appear unlike those of many American parents. Analysis of their responses to school choice opportunities appear useful, however, to those pondering the implementation of a multi-option program of schooling. The Collegeville parents exercised choices which for several years had been the perogatives of parents living within the residential subdistricts. The program of selection in which they participated was not an experimental one.

A major conclusion emerging from the investigation was that well over two-thirds of the parents used their choice opportunities to select the school they felt was most suited to their child. Few parents made the choice with little deliberation. Two considerations seemed to elicit this active search behavior. First, the schools available to the parents qualitatively differed. The differences among the schools were sufficiently great that the parents felt their children would be exposed to qualitatively different schooling were they to pick one school over another. Second, education levels of the parents were high. The parents were familiar with formal education. They had thought about the desirability of various types of schooling. The mothers were for the most part not tied to "nine to five jobs" which gave them opportunity to visit and research the schools. School diversity and parent knowledgeability appeared to contribute in major ways to the parents' active search behavior. The data suggests that parents at the lower ends

of the socioeconomic range among the parents studied were less likely to have heard about their choice opportunity and to have researched and deliberated over their option.

This cluster of parents appeared most concerned in making their choice about the nature of the school and classroom environment to which their child would be exposed. They relied upon the advice of friends and visits to the schools and their personal satisfaction with the school environment to make this judgment. Concerns about the distances to the schools, a desire to attend a school in which children of their own race predominated and attention to achievement test levels were by comparison much less of a concern. The parents in Collegeville afforded options made use of their choice opportunities. The class and school climate (defined in large part by teacher behavior) to which the child would be exposed was their major choice criterion.

Footnotes

1. See, for example, Milton Friedman, Capitalism and Freedom (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), Chapter 6; and Mario Fantini , "Options for Students, Parents and Teachers: Public Schools of Choice", Phi Delta Kappan,52(May, 1971), 541-543.

2. See, for example, Christopher J ncks, "Giving Parents Money for Schooling: Educational Vouchers," Phi Delta Kappan,52(September, 1970), 49-52.

3. Fantini, Mario. Public Schools of Choice.(New York:Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 42.

4. See A. B. Hollingshead and F. C. Redlich, Social Class and Mental Illness.(New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1958), 398-407.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

I am interested in talking with parents about their concerns related to the schooling their children will receive. You were picked because I am anxious to talk to parents who are using the schools for the first time. Summary observations of data collected will be shared with the school system. All individual interviews will be kept anonymous. In no way will the school system know whose responses they are examining.

1. Address _____

2. How long have you lived in University City? _____

3. Why did you move to University City? (Open ended)
   If you look at your card, perhaps you can give me answers in order of your priorities. Please rank the four most important reasons.

card 1

1. The community was close to where my husband/I work.
2. Friends encouraged us to move into the community.
3. We heard that there were good schools in University City.
4. We wanted to live in an integrated community.
5. There was reasonably priced housing in University City.
6. We understood that University City was a heterogeneous community in which to live.
7. We thought there were a lot of other people with life styles similar to our own.
8. Real estate agents had told us about the community.

4. What is your husband's occupation? Title of job _____

   Place of work _____

5. What is your occupation? (wife) Title of job _____

   Place of work _____

6. What is the highest educational level:

card 2

mother	father		
_____	_____	1.	Professional School
_____	_____	2.	Graduate School ___ What level ___
_____	_____	3.	College (number of years) ____
_____	_____	4.	High School
_____	_____	5.	8th grade

7. What are the ages of your children? _____ _____ _____

8. What age child attends what school? _____
_____
_____

9. I am particularly interested in the schools children use. I understand from the previous question that your kindergarten (or other) child is attending _____ school. Did you consider sending him/her elsewhere? _____.

If yes, where _____ (go to question No. 17).

If no, answer questions 10–16.

10. Some neighborhoods within University City have optional attendance plans; that is, children can go to more than one school without question. Are you aware that this is one of those areas that gives parents a choice of schools? _____

11. Do you recall getting any information about this choice? _____

12. What kind of information would you like to have had that would have helped inform you of this choice? Check numbers from the card.

card 3

1. A telephone call from the schools under the option plan.
2. Printed brochure discussing these choices sent to your home.
3. A telephone call from the superintendent's office.
4. This information printed in the University City local newspaper.
5. Any other source that might have been informative. Please explain specifically what this might be.

13. You have a choice between _____ and _____ schools. Are you familiar with these schools? _____ If you were to make a choice now what school might you select? _____

14. Could you give me some reasons for this selection? (Open ended first) Some people have given reasons that are on this sheet of paper. Would you please look at this list. Then carefully go through the items and check in column one those items that are <u>most</u> important to you. Now, check in column two those items that are <u>least</u> important to you. Finally, those items in column one that you checked as most important I would like you to rank order the top five in order of importance to you with number one being the most important.

1. We were concerned about the distance to school. We wanted the school that was the closest walk for our children.
2. The general atmosphere of the school was the sort we wanted for our child.
3. We were interested in a school that was racially integrated.
4. The principal's philosophy of education and attitude toward children was one we felt comfortable with.
5. We were concerned that the walk to the school we chose was the safest route for our child; that is, there were crossing guards or a safe walking path.
6. We responded to the overall curriculum and academic programs of the school.
7. We wanted to know what the overall achievement level of the pupils was.
8. We wanted a school where the children's background is similar to our own.
9. We were very interested in our child's teacher. We investigated her personal teaching style and classroom skills.
10. We wanted a school where the children would be exposed to children of different ethnic and racial backgrounds.
11. We wanted a school where transportation could be provided either by a parent on the way to work or by the school system.
12. We wanted to be certain we would have accessibility to both the principal and the teachers.
13. We wanted a school where the children would be exposed to children of different socioeconomic backgrounds.
14. We wanted to be certain the school had a good library or learning resource center.
15. We were most concerned about the physical facilities of the school.

15. Have you had the chance to get at all involved in school affairs? (in this district or someplace else)

    1. Do you go to conferences with your teachers? ____ How often?
    2. Do you go to PTA meetings? ____ If so, how often?
    3. Do you go to school board meetings? ____ If so, how often?
    4. Do you belong to any parent groups? ____
    5. Have you ever been a room mother? ____
    6. Have you ever been a classroom volunteer? ____
    7. Have you ever been a PTA officer? ____

16. Do you have any acquaintances who are on the school board, active in school affairs, volunteers in the schools or hold a political office in the community? ____ If so, did you talk to any of them about the schools? If yes, can you recall what you talked about.

17. If you considered sending your child to another school, you must be aware that you live in an area in which you have an option of two elementary schools. In what way were you informed of your choice? (That is, how did you find out about the option.) Please pick the applicable numbers on your card.

    Once the numbers have been picked probe to find out who told them what. That is, what kind of information did they get from each source.

card 4

1. Neighbors
2. Friends
3. Others (who)
4. League of Women Voters
5. School system central office
6. Literature from the school system
7. School meeting of some kind - specify
8. Influential community leader such as a school board member, political leader, school volunteer or a neighbor active in the community.

18. Have you had the chance to get at all involved in school affairs? (either here or in another district)

    1. Do you go to conferences with your teachers? How often? _____
    2. Do you go to PTA meetings? _____ If so, how often?
    3. Do you go to school board meetings? If so, how often? _____
    4. Do you belong to any parent groups? _____
    5. Have you ever been a room mother? _____
    6. Have you ever been a classroom volunteer? _____
    7. Have you ever been a PTA officer? _____

19. Do you have any acquaintances who are on the school board, active in school affairs, volunteers in the schools or hold a political office in the community? _____ If so, did you talk to any of them about your school choices? If yes, can you recall what you talked about?

20. What kind of information did you want to know about the schools? That is, what did you consider important to look for when seeking information? (Open ended first) Some people have given reasons that are on this sheet of paper. Would you please look at this list. Then carefully go through the items and check in column one those items that are <u>most</u> important to you. Now, check in column two those items that are <u>least</u> important to you. Finally, I would like you to rank order five items in column one that you checked as most important in order of their importance to you with number one being the most important.

1. We were concerned about the distance to school. We wanted the school that was the closest walk for our children.
2. The general atmosphere of the school was the sort we wanted for our child.
3. We were interested in a school that was racially integrated.
4. The principal's philosophy of education and attitude toward children was one we felt comfortable with.
5. We were concerned that the walk to the school we chose was the safest route for our child; that is, there were crossing guards or a safe walking path.
6. We responded to the overall curriculum and academic programs of the school.
7. We wanted to know what the overall achievement level of the pupils was.
8. We wanted a school where the children's background is similar to our own.
9. We were very interested in our child's teacher. We investigated her/his personal teaching style and classroom skills.
10. We wanted a school where the children would be exposed to children of different ethnic and racial backgrounds.
11. We wanted a school where transportation could be provided either by a parent on the way to work or by the school system.
12. We wanted to be certain we would have accessibility to both the principal and the teachers.
13. We wanted a school where the children would be exposed to children of different socioeconomic backgrounds.
14. We wanted to be certain the school had a good library or learning resource center.
15. We were most concerned about the physical facilities of the school.

21. To whom did you go to get your information? Can you remember what sources you personally used? (Open ended first) Did you use any of the following sources. Check the ones you used.

Then ask what kind of information they got from each source.

card 5

1. The principal of the school
2. The superintendent or the central administration
3. The school bulletin
4. The local PTA
5. Neighbors
6. Any friends in the community
7. Any teachers from either school
8. Any influential community persons such as school board members, politically active community members, school volunteers, persons holding political office.

22. Can you recall what you did when deciding about a school. That is, what was the sequence of events you followed prior to making a decision about a school. How did you go about gathering information and processing this information.

PROBE:
1. How did you become aware of decisions?
2. What kind of searching did you do?
3. If visited the schools what did they look for.
4. How often did they return to a school?
5. Did they want an academically oriented school and how could they tell?
6. What did they regard as important school related variables?
7. What were their priorities: What did they want for their child.
8. What were the most important factors you considered?

23. What is your notion about how far a five or six year old child can reasonably walk to school?

24. Would you let that child walk further to school than you would let him/her go to play with a friend? Do you have any boundaries beyond which your child may not go to play?

25. Are there any other factors more important than distance to consider when children are walking to school?

26. Can you recall when you first began to think about this decision? How long have you been considering this?

27. When was the peak decision making period in your family?

28. Do you recall the most important factors or criteria that you considered when you were at the point of making a decision about which school to use? I KNOW I HAVE ASKED THIS BUT IT IS SO IMPORTANT TO ME THAT I WANT TO BE CERTAIN I UNDERSTAND YOUR RESPONSE.

29. Are you satisfied with your choice of schools? ____ (If no, probe why)

30. Were you glad to have had the opportunity to make a choice? Why?

As you think over your choice process could you tell me which number on this card best reflects how you found that process to be.

1. It was an easy choice for us to make.
2. The choice was easy but we had some concern.

card 6

3. The choice process was lengthy but not too difficult.
4. The choice was tough for us but the decision came fairly quickly.
5. The choice process was a lot of trouble and was time consuming.
6. The choice process was agonizing and caused us much tension and concern.

31. If you were to make this decision again, would you do it differently?

32. When you think back on the decision making process, did you think it would be possible to change back to another school if you were not satisfied?

33. Could you describe the role your husband took in this decision making process?